

Miscellaneous

BETHLEHEM

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INTRODUCTION

LONG centuries have come and gone. The world has plunged forward through many revolutions. Almost all things are changed. There has been more change than men could have dreamed of. It seems incredible, even as a matter of history. The actual past has been more wonderful than any sibylline oracle would have dared to depict the future. History is more fantastic than prophecy. Time moves, but eternity stands still; and thus amidst perpetual change the faith, which is the representative of eternity on earth, remains, and is at rest; and its unchangeableness is our repose.

The Bethlehem of that night, of those forty days, has never passed away. It lives a real life; not the straggling Christian village, on which the Mussulman yoke seems to sit so lightly, on its stony ridge, but the old Bethlehem of that momentous hour when the Incarnate God lay on the ground amid the Cattle in the Cave. It lives, not only in the memory of faith, but in faith's actual realities as well. It lives a real, unbroken, unsuspended life, not in history only, or in art, or in poetry, or even in the energetic fertile worship and fleshly hearts of the faithful, but in the worshipful reality of the Blessed Sacrament. Round the tabernacle, which is our abiding Bethlehem, goes on the same world of beautiful devotion which surrounded the new-born Babe, real, out of real hearts, and realized by God's acceptance.

But independently of this august reality, Bethlehem exists as a living power in its continual production of supernatural things in the souls of men. It is for ever alluring them from sin. It is for ever guiding them to perfection. It is for ever impressing peculiar characteristics on the holiness of different persons. It is a divine type, and is moulding souls upon itself

all day long, and its works remain, and adorn the eternal home of God. A supernatural act of love from a soul in the feeblest state of grace is a grander thing than the discovery of a continent or the influence of a glorious literature. Yet Bethlehem is eliciting tens of thousands of such acts of love each day from the souls of men.

It is a perpetual fountain of invisible miracles. It is better than a legion of angels in itself, always hard at work for God, and magnificently successful. Its sphere of influence is the whole wide world, the regions where Christmas falls in the heart of summer, as well as in these lands of ours. It whispers over the sea, and hearts on shipboard are responding to it. It is everywhere in dense cities, where loathsome wickedness is festering in the haunts of hopeless poverty, keeping itself clean there as the sunbeams of heaven. It vibrates up deep mountain glens, which the foot of priest rarely treads, and down in damp mines, where death is always proximate and sacraments remote. It soothes the aching heart of the poor Pontiff on his throne of heroic suffering and generous self-sacrifice; and it cradles to rest the sick child who, though it cannot read as yet, has a picture of starry Bethlehem in its heart, which its mother's words have painted there. Bethlehem is daily a light in a thousand dark places, beautifying what is harsh, sanctifying what is lowly, making heavenly the affections which are most of earth. It is all this, because it is an inexhaustible depth of devotion supplying countless souls of men with stores of divine love, of endless variety, and yet all of them of most exquisite loveliness. This, then, is what we are to consider in the present chapter: Bethlehem as a sea of devotion, an expanse of supernatural holiness, a wide field of sanctities, which are a great part of the daily life of the Church of God.

The mysteries of the Incarnation are a sort of disclosure to us of the infinity of God. They reveal Him by the very manner in which they compress His immensity. When we come to consider any one of these mysteries by itself, we are continually being astonished by the number of phases under which it presents itself to us. It seems to diversify itself endlessly, to pass from one light to another, like the hues of the prism,

or to enter into an inexhaustible series of combinations, momentarily changing, like the play of gold and color in the sunset. The different circumstances of life, bright or dark, overshadow or illumine the mystery, and reveal to us depths in it which we had never suspected, and beauties which we had hitherto omitted to observe. Sorrow and joy are both of them instruments of the soul; and both of them are at once telescopes and microscopes. With our growth in grace the changes of the mystery are yet more remarkable. It puts on something more than fresh significance; it is like a new revelation. Who has not felt how every Holy Week brings the Passion to him new, astonishing, and untasted? The odor and the savor of the mystery change, as it combines with our changed and augmented grace. No Christmas is like its predecessor. Bethlehem grows more enchanting. The strain of the angels is sweeter. We know more of Mary and of Joseph. The Child surpasses Himself year after year. Moreover the significances of Our Lord's mysteries are not mere theological allegories, much less are they poetical interpretations. They mean all that they can mean. They mean the same to all men, and yet different things to each man. They unfold fresh meanings to fresh generations. The ages of the world comment differently upon them, and there is always new matter for each new commentary. This comes from the unutterable prolific truthfulness of God. No one has ever fathomed yet the least mystery of the Three-and-Thirty Years. Angelic spirits are hanging over the abyss deep down, like sea-birds over the dizzy cliff, and far below them, because of such sublimer wing, the soul of Mary floats softly, and wafts herself over depths to which they dare not descend; and yet even she has not fathomed yet the fair mysteries to which she ministered.

If we think of the different ways in which our loving fear could approach the Cave of Bethlehem, we shall find on reflection perhaps that there are nine spirits of devotion which take possession of our souls. There are nine attitudes in which our hearts will naturally put themselves before the Babe. The genius of the Sanctuary seems ninefold. It is not easy to express these nine loves, these nine worships, in words; for not only does one follow hard upon another, but they borrow

from each other, pass off into each other, return upon each other, reflect or anticipate each other, blend, intermingle, and melt into one, after such a marvellous and characteristically divine fashion, that it is impossible to define them. To portray them is as much as we can do. Now, when we come to the historical Bethlehem, we find, as a matter of fact, that the first worshippers there may be said to be nine in number, a coincidence which seems to raise our ninefold division of the devotion to the Sacred Infancy to something more than a devotional conjecture. As there were nine choirs of angels round the throne of the Eternal Word in heaven, so were there, in type and semblance at least, nine choirs of worshippers round the Incarnate Word in Bethlehem. Nine choirs of angels sang in heaven, nine kinds of worshippers silently adored on earth.

Yet we must not forget that amidst all this variety there is at the same time a complete and higher unity. All devotions to the Sacred Infancy have one spirit in them, however diversified they may be. It is a spirit by which they are distinguished from devotions to the Passion, or to the Hidden Life, or to the Public Life, or to the Risen Life. Spiritual writers may differ as to the definition or description of this spirit. They may not agree in what it consists. They may hold conflicting opinions as to the peculiar graces which this spirit forms. But there is no simple lover of Jesus who does not, as it were with an undelaying and unerring instinct, discern the spirit of these devotions to the Sacred Infancy, and see how one is like to another in some essential property, while they are all different among themselves in other respects, and different also in that particular spirit from other devotions to the Incarnation. Then, again, in another way they all belong to a still higher unity. There are points in which devotions to the Sacred Infancy touch upon devotions to the Passion, and, indeed, identify themselves with them. The same may be said of devotions connected with the other divisions of Our Lord's life. These junctions, or points of union, indicate the unity of all devotions to the Sacred Humanity, and the oneness of spirit which pervades them all. It is sometimes wonderful to see the results which grace produces in the soul by

means of the congenialities of seemingly opposite devotions, and how an old grace lives on in a new vocation, feeding on something in a fresh devotion which has an affinity to devotions that have now been changed for others, and superseded by them. Thus, while we speak of the diversity of devotions to the Sacred Infancy, we must keep steadily before us that they are a family of kindred devotions with the same spiritual blood in them, and that they have this separate unity of their own distinct from that higher unity to which they all belong as devotions to the Sacred Humanity.

The special devotion to the Childhood of Jesus which has distinguished the later Church was a growth of the Carmelite Order, in whose blooming wilderness it was planted by the Holy Ghost at Beaune in France. The Venerable Margaret of Beaune was the instrument whom He raised up to propagate this devotion, not only by her teaching, but by her mystical life and states of prayer, which were a sort of dramatic representation of the mysteries of the Sacred Infancy. Many older saints, such as St. Anthony of Padua and St. Cajetan, had been distinguished by a like special devotion. But it was systematized in the hands of the French Carmelites, and took a more tangible and exclusive shape than it had ever done before. We have thus received it from one of the grandest congregations of the grandest order in the Church, and the order which belongs to our Blessed Lady by a more ancient and especial right than any other. The present devotion to the Sacred Infancy is as much the gift of the Carmelites as the present devotion to the Sacred Heart is the gift of the lowly sweet-spirited daughters of the Visitation. But it is remarkable how seldom, if ever, the works of God spring from one fountain. There were many persons in France, contemporaries of Margaret of Beaune, who had at the same time been led by the impulses of the Holy Ghost to a special devotion to the Sacred Infancy. Among these the well-known De Renty should have the highest place, although he was not singular in his devotion. It is said of him by his biographer that "he existed in the grace of the Infancy of Jesus as a sponge exists in the sea, only that he was incomparably more lost and confounded in the exhaustless ocean of the infinite riches of that Divine

Infancy than a sponge is in the waters of the sea." While some have made purity, and others innocence, and others simplicity, the distinguishing spirit of all these devotions, it seems as if De Renty and others of his time considered the acting in all things according to a pure movement of grace as the special spirit of the Sacred Infancy. An attentive study of the lives of those saintly persons whom the Holy Ghost has formed on these devotions seems to bear out this conclusion. But, at any rate, the unity of these devotions is undeniable, as is also their power to form a character of very peculiar and cognizable sanctity proper to themselves. At the same time their attraction is less universal than that of the Passion, and is seldom disjoined from it.

Before we proceed to examine the nine types of devotion with which the Cave of Bethlehem will furnish us, we must remind ourselves of the difference between devotions to the Sacred Humanity and those to angels and saints, or even to the mysteries of our Blessed Lady, which are so inextricably blended with the mysteries of Our Lord that they may almost be said to be one phase, and that a universal one, of all His mysteries. Mary is present almost everywhere, and her shadow falls on pictures where she is not represented on the canvas. Well as we know this difference between devotions to the Sacred Humanity and those to angels, saints, or even our Blessed Lady, we should never spare ourselves the admonition of it, because of its surpassing importance, especially as securing that doctrinal accuracy which should distinguish all devotions to the Sacred Humanity, and which, by keeping Our Lord's Divinity before us every instant, deepens our devotion, and encompasses it with that breathless reverence which is the very life of heavenly love.

We must bear in mind, then, throughout, that devotions to the Sacred Humanity involve nothing less than divine worship. We pay to the Sacred Heart or the Precious Blood of our Blessed Lord precisely the same adoration as to the Most Holy Trinity, because His Divinity communicates to them its own worth by virtue of the Hypostatic Union. Although His Two Natures are uncommingled and unconfused, so that His Divine Nature receives no admixture, and His Human Nature loses

none of its genuineness, and although His Two Wills, Human and Divine, are quite distinct, nevertheless His Two Natures are united in One Person, and that Person is Divine. The union of the Two Natures takes place, not by the blending of the Two, but in the unity of the Person, and this is what is meant by the term Hypostatic Union. This confers an infinite value and dignity on the operations of His Human Nature, and entitles each drop of Blood, and, indeed, whatsoever belongs to the integrity of His Human Nature, so long as it remains in the Hypostatic Union, to the honors of divine worship. Almost all the objections which unthinking persons sometimes urge against particular devotions to the Sacred Humanity, or against the forms which those devotions take, arise from a forgetfulness of this fundamental doctrine of the faith. All such devotions imply habits of mental prayer, and mental prayer is a school in which even the simplest learn much theology. Perhaps no one who had a real habit of mental prayer was ever found among the objectors to the devotion to the Sacred Heart; but without this habit such objections are most intelligible, because of the way in which the dogmas of the faith can remain undeveloped, and their inferences unsuspected, in those who, not being theologians by education, have not become such by prayer.

Yet, while adoration in the strictest sense of the word enters into and gives an august solemnity to all our devotions to the Sacred Humanity, they are nevertheless tempered with a familiarity unlike the worship of the Divine Perfections. It is not that they are more tender, for the tenderest and most tearful of all worships is that of the inscrutable grandeurs of the Most Holy Trinity. No devotion can equal that for melting the heart and filling it full of the most childlike happiness and softness. But there is a certain boldness of approach, a certain freedom of human language, a certain deeply reverential familiarity, yet still a familiarity, which distinguishes devotions to the Sacred Humanity. We have a distinct picture of the object of our worship in our minds, which affects both our language and our feeling. Our Lord's assumption of our nature is a peculiar approach to us, to which we on our side have to correspond, and we correspond by this familiarity.

Thus the familiarity becomes itself a part of our reverence for the Incarnation, an element in our worship of it. A devotion which rests upon created images and historical facts must have a character of its own.

Even the worship of the unseen God, when it is pleading past mercies and reposing on the remembrance of old compassions, imbibes a kind of familiarity without any detriment to its reverence, as we may see by comparing the worship of Job with that of the patriarch Jacob. The latter speaks and entreats almost as man with man, whereas the former cowers before the whirlwind of the Divine Majesty, while the boldness of his expostulations is wrung from him by the very agony of his fear. Devotions to the Sacred Humanity are a kind of divine worship of which neither angels nor men could ever have dreamed without revelation, but which have been invented by God Himself, and contain in themselves the spirit and significance of that mystery of the Incarnation which was the cause, and type, and rule of all creation. They form a liturgy of divine composition, a missal and a breviary of the divine ideas, such as would be unimaginable by any mere created intelligence. What the Lord's Prayer is as a form of words, these devotions are as the attitude of adoring minds; and from their divine authorship they have a sacramental power and a privileged acceptance.

They are therefore of an entirely different nature from devotions to the angels or the saints. In common with those devotions, they have an intercessory character, only of a far more efficacious and irresistible kind; while at the same time they approach God directly by divine worship. They unite all the excellences of other devotions, only in an unspeakably supereminent degree, with the awfulness of perfect adoration, and have also a peculiarity of their own derived from the grand mystery of the Incarnation, out of which they flow. They are necessary also to a worship which is mystically higher and more perfect than themselves. As Our Lord's Sacred Humanity is our way to God, so in ordinary cases these devotions are the way of the soul to the contemplation of the Divine Attributes, and of the secrets of the Undivided Trinity. Devotions to the Sacred Humanity can never be dispensed with.

They will not allow themselves even to be depreciated in comparison with what are technically higher contemplations. They do not form a stage in the spiritual life, which we ultimately transcend. They are not merely an ascent to a table-land on a higher level, from which we may look back upon them. They are indispensable from the first. They are indispensable to the last. A disesteem of them, if it is intellectual, is heresy; if it is practical, is delusion. These devotions also have a peculiarly substantial effect upon our spiritual character, and mould our spiritual life with an irresistible pacific force, which belongs only to themselves, and which distinguishes their action in the work of our sanctification. There are many reasons for this, many which we cannot explain, although we divine them and are sensible of their presence. But the chief reason is the amount of the living spirit of Jesus which they both contain and communicate, contain in an inexhaustible measure, and communicate according to the degree of our purity and fervor; and all holiness is but a transformation of us into the substantial likeness of Our Lord.

I

OUR BLESSED LADY.

OUR Blessed Lady presents us with the first type of devotion to the Sacred Infancy. We have already seen how in her worship of the Child she represented all creation, and immeasurably surpassed it. Her worship was in many respects a different kind from what ours can be, independently of its exceeding in degree even the worship of the saints. She herself occupied a singular position in God's creation, which, as it were, spheres her apart from all other creatures. Her height is not only unattainable by any other; it is also unapproachable. She belongs to the hierarchy of the Incarnation, and has what may be called rights over our Blessed Lord, which are sufficient of themselves to give a distinct character to her worship of Him. In all this, therefore, she was admirable rather than imitable, and it is not of such things that we are now going to speak.

She is an example as well as a wonder, and it is her pattern which we are at present to put before ourselves. Our possibilities of holiness are greater than we like to suppose. We estimate them below the truth, because it is painful to our self-love to contemplate such a gulf as really exists between what we actually attain and what we might attain. For the same reason we underestimate the amount of grace which we receive, in order that we may not have to force upon our own notice the difference between the height which is practicable to us, through correspondence to grace positively conferred upon us, and the lowness of our real state in the spiritual life. A detailed correspondence to grace in things quite within our compass, would lead us almost unawares to heights of sanctity, which nature trembles to contemplate when it beholds them in their full abrupt altitude, and not as a gradual ascent. If a man saw in one collective vision all the bodily pain and mental suffering which would successively accumulate upon him during his whole life, he would perhaps be driven to despair, or at least a shadow would lie over his spirit which would blacken all that was bright around him. In like manner men shrink from the pursuit of perfection when

they realize the amount of self-crucifixion which will have taken place by the time the proposed height is gained. Thus it frightens us to think of Jesus and Mary as our examples.

In Our Lord's case we take refuge in His Divinity, and narrow unwarrantably the sphere of His human actions. In Our Lady's case we magnify her exceptional greatness, and think we do her virtues homage by putting them beyond the reach of our imitation. Even with the saints our cowardice loves to exaggerate the admirable at the expense of the imitable. Alas! if we would but let each day's grace lead us whither it wills with its gentle step, its kind allurements, and its easy sacrifice, in what a sweetly incredible nearness to the world of saints should we not find ourselves before many years were gone! It was correspondence to grace which was Mary's grandest grace. It is her correspondence to grace which interprets and accounts for her immense holiness. It was her correspondence to grace which made her sanctity congruous to her unparalleled exaltation. If we will be but as faithful to our little graces as she was to her great ones, we shall at last draw near to her, or what we may call near, by following her example in this one respect.

The distinguishing characteristic of her worship of Jesus was its humility. Those who are raised on high have a lower depth to which they can stoop than those whom grace has simply lifted out of the abyss and left almost on its brink. But, independently of this, great sanctity seems to have a power of humiliation, which is the result of all its combined graces, and not of any one of them in particular. For both these reasons Mary's humility has no parallel among the saints. It distantly approaches to that unutterable self-abasement which belongs to our Blessed Lord Himself, that grace to which He clung, and in the Blessed Sacrament still clings, with such an adorable predilection. It was through her humility that Mary received her various sanctifications. Indeed, it was through her humility that she became the Mother of God. The love of that grace fixed the eye of the Word, the eye of His eternal choice, upon her. He looked upon the lowliness of His handmaid. We speak of great graces raising us up on high; but our language would express more truth if we spoke

rather of their sinking us deep in God. To sink in our own nothingness, provided we love while we are sinking, is to sink deep in God. When we sink out of sight in Him, not only out of sight of the world, but also, and much more, out of sight of self, then is our life really hidden in God, and hidden there with Christ, because His Sacred Humanity dwells so deep in God by virtue of its marvellous abasement. Thus we cannot doubt that, at the moment when Our Lady received the grace of the Immaculate Conception, she humbled herself before God in a manner which one of the saints even would hardly understand.

By this act of humility she at once established a kind of proportion between her merits and the magnitude of the grace she had received. It was the allurements of her beautiful humility which caused the Word to anticipate the time of His Incarnation. At the moment of the Incarnation she was clothed afresh with an indescribable humility. In the creature humility is the infallible accompaniment of nearness to the Creator. It is the only created thing which enables creatures to live in the atmosphere which is immediately around the Throne. When, therefore, the august majesty of the Eternal lay awfully furled within her bosom, the humility which possessed her whole soul must plainly have been beyond our conceptions of that heavenly grace. But, as all her graces were ever growing, and as for nine long months there was the same abiding reason for this unspeakable self-abasement, to what a depth in God must not her humility have reached by that midnight hour in Bethlehem! Yet, when she beheld her own Son, her newborn Babe, lying on the ground, and remembered that He was truly none other than the everlasting God, and the very Son of her own substance, the flower which had blossomed of her own virginal blood, she must at once have sunk into fresh and nameless depths of holiest abjection. No creature ever made an offering to the Eternal Father from lower depths than Mary, when she offered Jesus to Him at the moment of His birth, except Jesus when He offered Himself to His Father at that selfsame moment, blending His oblation with His Mother's: and He found unshared depths of self-annihilation which He could not have reached had He been less than God.

This, then, is the first example which Mary gives us, an example whose importance and significance are greatly increased when we regard it in connection with devotion to the Sacred Humanity. It is only by an intense spirit of adoration that the heavenly virtues of these devotions are extracted and distilled in our souls.

The first fruit of humility is joy. The grace which we find in the depths to which we sink is spiritual buoyancy; and our lightness of spirit is in proportion to the profoundness of our abasement. A mother's joy over her firstborn has passed into a proverb. But no creature has ever rejoiced as Mary did. No joy was ever so deep, so holy, so beautiful as hers. It was the joy of possessing God in a way in which none had possessed Him heretofore, a way which was the grandest work of His wisdom and His power, the greatest height of His inexplicable love of creatures. It was the joy of presenting to God what was equal to Himself, and so covering His Divine Majesty with a co-extensive worship. It was the joy of being able by that offering to impetrate for her fellow creatures wonderful graces, which were new both in their abundance, their efficacy, and their excellence. It was the joy of the beauty of Jesus, of the ravishing sweetness of His Countenance, of the glorious mystery of every look and touch of Him, of the thrilling privileges of her maternal love, and of the contagion of His unspeakable joy, which passed from His soul into hers.

The whole world, by right of its creation, by right of having been created by a God so illimitably and adorably good and bright and loving, is a world of joy. Joy is so completely its nature that it can hardly help itself. It blossoms into joy without knowing what it is doing. It breaks out into mirthful songs, like a heedless child whose heart is too full of gaiety for thought. It has not a line or form about it which is not beautiful. It leaps up to the sunshine, and when it opens itself, it opens in vernal greenness, in summer flowers, in autumnal fruits, and then rests again for its winter rest, like a happy cradled infant, under its snowy coverlid adorned with fairy-like crystals, while the pageantry of the gorgeous storms only makes music round its unbroken slumber. Mary, the cause of all our joy, was herself a growth of earth, a specimen

of what an unfallen world would have been; and it was on an earthly stem that Jesus Himself, the joy of all joys, blossomed and gave forth His fragrance. Thus nature and life tend to joy at all hours. Joy is their legitimate development, their proper perfection, in fact the very law of living; for the bare act of living is itself an inestimable joy. Nothing glorifies God so much as joy. See how the perfume lingers in the withered flower: it is the angel of joy who cannot take heart to wing his flight back from earth to heaven, even when his task is done.

It is self which has marred this joy. It is the worship of self, the perpetual remembrance of self, the making self a centre, which has weighed the world down in its jubilee, and almost overballasted it with sadness. It is humility above all other things which weakens or snaps asunder the holdfasts of selfishness. A lowly spirit is of necessity an unselfish one. Humility is a perpetual presence of God; and how can self be otherwise than forgotten there? A humble man is a joyous man. He is in the world like a child who claims no rights, and questions not the rights of God, but simply lives and expands in the sunshine round about him. The little one does not even claim the right to be happy; happiness comes to him as a fact, or rather as a gracious law, and he is happy without knowing of his happiness, which is the truest happiness of all. So it is with him whom humility has sanctified. Moreover, as joy was the original intent of creation, it must be an essential element in all worship of the Creator. Nay, is it not almost a definition of grace, the rejoicing in what is sad to fallen nature because of the Creator's will? Thus Mary's devotion to the Babe of Bethlehem was one of transcending joy. There is no worship where there is no joy. For worship is something more than either the fear of God or the love of Him: it is delight in Him.

With Mary's joy, if not out of it, came also a fresh increase of her unutterable purity, a grace whose perfection is the complete loss of self in God. There is something in purity which is akin to infinity. It implies a detachment from creatures, an emancipation from all ignoble even though sinless ties, which sets us free to wing our flight to God, and to nestle in Him

alone. All attachment to creatures narrows our capacity for holding God. There are many earthly loves which ennoble us; but they do so by saving us from lower things, not by leading us to higher. When the competition is between earthly love and divine, it is the last which suffers, because it is its nature to possess hearts and not to share them. Multitudes of men often come to love God by loving men. It belongs to the saints to have a love of men, which is nothing else than a portion of their love of God.

Mary could love her Child with all the passionate fondness of an heroic mother; for her fondness was literally worship also. The excess of human love, which we name idolatry in others, in her was simply adoration. The mystery of our Lord's Nativity was in itself a mystery of purity. It was a new miracle adorning her virginity. It would therefore of itself immensely increase her purity, and render it yet more sublime. But her heavenly joy brought with it also an augmentation of this loveliest of graces. Purity is the proper gift of joyous spirits. Its home is in the sunshine, and its voice an endless song. Even while clouds and light are struggling for the mastery on earth, purity turns faith into sight; for the pure in heart wait not for heaven. They see God now, and they see Him everywhere; and as joy brought purity, so purity brings fresh joy; for what is the sight of God but jubilee?

From our Blessed Lady's purity came her deep simplicity. This is a grace which belongs to the regions near God. In our close valleys we know but little of it. It is the soul's highest imitation of the Divine Nature. It betokens already that great victory of grace, when oblivion of self no longer requires an effort, but has become like a second nature. Mary did not reflect upon herself. She did not refine with the subtilties of her lofty science on the mystery before her. She blended the earthly and divine in one act of worship, with something like the simplicity with which they were blended in the union of the Incarnation. Her worship sought for nothing. It rested in its object, and was content. It was not aware of itself. It took no count of things. It had lost itself in God.

Yet this simplicity, whose life is in self-oblivion, how thoughtful does it make us of others, of multitudes of others,

of no less a multitude than all the dwellers upon earth! Mary gives away her joy as soon as she has got it. She gives Him away for us. In the very heaven of Bethlehem she consents to the horrors of Calvary. Her first devotion to the Sacred Infancy ends in devotion to the Passion. What else but a spirit of oblation could come of such unselfishness? How many lessons are there for us in all this! How beautiful can the devotion, that is for ever unselfing itself, perfect itself in all its various degrees by copying Mary at the feet of her new-born Babe? It is a venturous humility, and yet after all a true humility, which dares to take no less a pattern for its worship than that of God's own Mother, who worshipped for all God's creatures with a worship to which their united worship, endlessly prolonged, never can come near.

II

ST. JOSEPH

ST. JOSEPH presents us with a similar, yet somewhat different, type of devotion to the Sacred Infancy. We know nothing of the beginnings of this wonderful saint. Like the fountains of the sacred river of the Egyptians, his early years are hidden in an obscurity which his subsequent greatness renders beautiful, just as the sunset is reflected in the dark and clouded east. He was doubtless high in sanctity before his Espousals with Mary. God's eternal choice of him would seem to imply as much. During the nine months the accumulation of grace upon him must have been beyond our powers of calculation. The company of Mary, the atmosphere of Jesus, the continual presence of the Incarnate God, and the fact of his own life being nothing but a series of ministries to the unborn Word, must have lifted him far above all other saints, and perchance all angels too. Our Lord's Birth, and the sight of His Face, must have been to him like another sanctification. The mystery of Bethlehem was enough of itself to place him among the highest of the saints. As with Mary, self-abasement was his grandest grace. He was conscious to himself that he was the shadow of the Eternal Father, and this knowledge overwhelmed him. With the deepest reverence he hid himself in the constant thought of the dignity of his office, in the profoundest self-abjection. Commanding makes deep men more humble than obeying. St. Joseph's humility was fed all through life by having to command Jesus, by being the superior of his God. The priest, who has most reason to deplore the poverty of his attainments in humility, is humble at least when he comes to consecrate at Mass. For years Joseph lived in the awful sanctity of that which to the priest is but a moment. The little house at Nazareth was as the outspread square of the white corporal. All the words he spoke were almost words of consecration. A life worthy of this, up to the mark of this—what a marvel of sanctity it must have been!

To be hidden in God, to be lost in His bright light, is surely the highest of vocations among the sons of men. Nothing, to

a spiritually discerning eye, can surpass the grandeur of a life which is only for others, only ministering to the divine purposes as in the place of God, without any personal vocation, or any purpose of its own. This is the exceeding magnificence of Mary, that her personality is almost lost in her official vicinity to God. This, too, in its measure was Joseph's vocation. He lives now only to serve the Infant Jesus, as heretofore he has but lived to guard Mary, the lily of God. He is as it were the head of the Holy Family, only that, like a good superior, he may the more completely be the servant, and the subject, and the instrument. Moreover, he makes way for Jesus when Jesus comes of age. He passes noiselessly into the shadow of eternity, like the moon behind a cloud, complaining not that her silver light is intercepted. He does not live on to the days of the miracles and the preaching, much less to the fearful grandeurs of Gethsemane and Calvary. His spirit is the spirit of Bethlehem. He is, in an especial way, the property of the Sacred Infancy. It was his one work, his single sphere.

He is thus an object of imitation to those souls who have seasons when they are so possessed with devotion to the Sacred Infancy, that it appears to them impossible to have any devotion at all to the passion, and who are very naturally disquieted by this phenomenon, and distrustful of it. Singularity is always to be distrusted. If we are out of sympathy with the great multitude of common believers, the probability is that we are in a state of delusion. There are, indeed, such things as extraordinary impulses of the Holy Ghost, but they are rare; and even they follow analogies, and follow them most when they seem strangest and most singular. Thus there is no instance of any of the saints having gone through life so absorbed in any other of our Blessed Lord's mysteries as to have disregarded the Passion, or not placed it among their foremost devotions. The prominence given to the Passion in the spiritual life of Margaret of Beaune, especially during her latter years, is a remarkable confirmation of this doctrine.

Yet with some there are seasons—seasons which come, and do their work, and go—during which they seem blessedly possessed with the spirit of Bethlehem, and in those times noth-

ing is seen of Calvary but its blue outline, like a mountain on the horizon. Grace has something especial to do in the soul, and it does it in this way. St. Joseph must be our patron at those seasons, as having been sanctified himself with an apparent exclusiveness by these very mysteries of Bethlehem. Yet it was not with him, neither will it be with us, a devotion of unmingled sweetness. At the bottom of the Crib lies the Cross; and the Infant's Heart is a living Crucifix, for all He sleeps so softly and looks so fair. From Joseph's first fear for Mary, and the mystical darkness of his tormenting perplexity, to the very day when he laid his tired head on the lap of his Foster-son, and slept his last sleep, it was one continued suffering, the torture of anxiety without the imperfection of disquietude. The very awe of the nine months must have killed with its perpetual sacred pressure all that was merely natural within him; and our inner nature never dies a painless death, as the outer sometimes does. Poverty must have appeared to him in a new light, less easy to bear, when Jesus and Mary were concerned. The rude men and unsympathizing women of Bethlehem were but the forerunners of the dark-eyed idolaters of Egypt, with their jealous suspicions of the Hebrew stranger, while his weak arm was the only rampart God had set round the Mother and the Child. The flight into Egypt and the return from it, the fears which would not let him dwell in the Holy City, and the rustic unkindliness of the illfamed Nazarenes—all these were so many Calvaries to Joseph. Sweet and beautiful as is the look of Bethlehem, they who carry the Infant Jesus in their souls carry the Cross also, and where He pillows His Head He leaves the marks behind Him of an unseen Crown of Thorns. In truth, the death of Joseph was itself a martyrdom. He was worn out with love of the Holy Child. It was love, divine love, which slew him; so that his devotion was like that of the Holy Innocents, a devotion of martyrdom and blood.

The foundation, therefore, of Joseph's devotion was, as with Mary, his humility. Yet his humility was somewhat different from hers. It was another kind of grace. It was less self-forgetting. Its eye was always on its own unworthiness. It was a humility that for ever seemed surprised at its own gifts,

and yet so tranquil that there was nothing in it either of the precipitation or the ungracefulness of a surprise. He was unselfishness itself, the very personification of it. His whole life meant others, and did not mean himself. This was the significance of his vocation. He was an instrument with a living soul, an accessory not a principle, a superior, only to be the more a satellite. He was simply the visible providence of Jesus and Mary. But his unselfishness did not take the shape of self-oblivion.

Hence his peculiar grace was self-possession. Calmness amid anxiety, considerateness amid startling mysteries, a quiet heart combined with an excruciating sensitiveness, a self-consciousness maintained for the single purpose of an unintermitting immolation of self, the promptitude of docility grafted on the slowness of age and the measuredness of natural character, unbroken sweetness amid harassing cares, abrupt changes, and unexpected situations, a facile passiveness under each movement of grace, each touch of God's finger, as if he were floating over earth rather than rooted in it, the seeming victim of a wayward, romantic lot and of dark divine enigmas, yet calm, incurious, unquestioning, unbewildered, reposing upon God—these are the operations of grace which seem to us so wonderful in Joseph's soul. It was a soul which glassed in its pellucid tranquillity all the images of heavenly things that were round about it. When mysterious graces were showered down upon him, there is hardly a stir to be seen upon his silent passiveness. He seems to take them as if they were the common sunshine, and the common air, and the dew which fell on all men, and not on himself alone. He was like the speechless, silver-shining, glassy lake, just trembling with the thin, noiseless raindrops, while it rather hushes than quickens its only half audible pulses on the blue gravelled shore. It almost seemed as if, joined with his self-possession, there was also an unconsciousness of his great graces, if we could think that great saints did not know their graces as none others know them. He was not a light that shone, he was rather an odor that breathed, in the house of God. He was like the mountain woods in the wet, weeping summer. They speak to heaven by their manifold fragrances, which yet make one

woodland odor, like the many dialects of a rich language, as if the fresh, wind-driven drops beat the sensitive leaves of many hidden and sequestered plants, and so made them give out their perfumes, just as sorrow by its gentle bruising brings out hidden sweetness from all characters of men. So it was with St. Joseph. He moves about among the mysteries of the Sacred Infancy, a shy silent figure. Between the going and coming of great mysteries we just hear him, as we hear the rain timidly whispering among the leaves in the intervals of the deep-toned thunder. But his odor is everywhere. It is the very genius of the place. It clings to our garments and lingers in our senses, even when we have left the Cave of Bethlehem and gone out into the world's work.

His mind was turned inward upon his dread office, rather than outward on the harvest of God's glory among men. This follows from his self-possession. He stood in an official position; but it was only towards God, not towards both God and men, as was Our Lady's case. Hence there was less of the spirit of oblation about Joseph than about Mary. He and God were together. He knew not of others, except as making him suffer, and so winning themselves titles to his love. The sacerdotal character of Mary's holiness was not apparent in him. He was a priest of the Infant Jesus, neither to sacrifice Him nor to offer Him, but only to guard Him, to handle Him with reverence and to worship Him. Like a deacon, he might bear the Precious Blood, but not consecrate it. Or he was the priestly sacristan to whose custody the tabernacle was committed. This was more his office than saying Mass. All this was in keeping with his reserve. It was to be expected that the shadow of the Eternal Father should move without sound over the world. Shadows speak only by the shade they cast, deepening, beautifying, harmonizing all things, filling the hearts they cover with the mute eloquence of tenderest emotions. God is perhaps more communicative than He is reserved. For, though He has told us less than He has withheld, yet how much more out of sheer love has He told us than we needed to know; and what has He kept back except that which, because of our littleness, we could not know, or that which for our good it was better we should not know?

Some saints represent to us this communicativeness of God, and others His reserve. St. Joseph is the head and father of these last. It is strange that, while saints have often shown forth to men the union of justice and of mercy which there is in God, or the combination of swiftness and of slowness in the divine operations, and others of the apparent contrarieties in God, no saint appears to have ever copied him in the union of communicativeness and of reserve. We find that illustrated only in the Incarnate Word and His Immaculate Mother. St. Joseph was the image of the Father. The Father had spoken once, speaks now, His unbroken Eternal Word. Joseph needed but to stand by in silence, and fold gently in his arms that Word which the Father was yet speaking. The manifested Word, the outpoured Spirit, of them Joseph was not the representative. They only hung him round with the splendors of Their dear love, because he was the image of the Father. Such does he seem to our eyes, such is the image of him which rests in our loving hearts—mute, rapture-bound, awe-stricken, with his soul, tranquil, unearthly, shadowy, like the loveliness of night, and the beautiful age upon his face speaking there like a silent utterance, a free, placid, and melodious thanksgiving to the Most Holy Trinity.

III

ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST

WE find our third type of devotion to the Infant Jesus in St. John the Baptist. As to Joseph, so also to John, Jesus came through Mary as He comes to us. In the sweet sound of Mary's voice came the secret power of the Infant Redeemer's absolving grace. John worshipped behind the veil Him Who also from behind His veil had absolved him from his original sin, had broken his fetters, fulfilled him with eminent holiness, and anointed him to be His own immediate Precursor. He too, like Joseph, was simply to be an instrument. He too was to prepare the way for the Child of Bethlehem. His light was to fade as the light of Jesus grew fuller on the sight of men. He too, strange tenant of the wilderness, in grotesque apparel, companion of angels and of wild beasts, a feeder on savage food—he too was to be hidden from the gaze of men during the long first years of his life, as Joseph had been, and as his own forerunner Elias was to be through the long, revolving centuries of his closing life up to the very scenes which should herald the coming Doom. Like Joseph, the Baptist was withdrawn from Calvary, and stood on the borders of the Gospel light, only half emerging from the shadows of the Old Testament. Like Joseph, he was bidden to be Our Lord's superior, but with humility unlike that of Joseph, and yet a veritable humility, he argued against his own elevation, and bowed only to the gentle command of Him Who sought baptism at his hands, and gave for others a cleansing sacramental power to the water that could but simulate ablution to His spotless Soul. His too was a hermit spirit, like Joseph's; but his was calmly cradled in the solitudes of the desert, not chafed evermore by the crowding of uncongenial men. He was a light that burned as well as shone, and of him it was that the Incarnate Word declared that none born of woman had yet been so great as he. He also belongs, like Joseph, to the Sacred Infancy, handing over his followers to Jesus, ending where his Lord began, like the moon setting as the sun rises,

and, like the Holy Innocents, worshipping his Saviour with his blood.

The Baptist was Our Lord's first convert. His redemption was, so to speak, the first sacrament which Jesus administered. Through Mary's voice the gift of original justice was miraculously given him, the complete use of reason conferred upon him, and the immense graces communicated to him, which were implied in his extraordinary office and Our Lord's marvellous words about him. When we consider all these things—Our Lord's quickening His Mother's steps to go and work this stupendous conversion, the grandeur of the mission to which Elizabeth's unborn child was destined, his exulting use of the reason supernaturally anticipated in his soul, his redemption as the first work of Our Lord's love of souls in person, and possibly the next step in the scale of graces to the Immaculate Conception, and his reception of all these things through the sweet mouth and salutation of Mary—we may form some idea of the characteristics of his devotion to the Babe of Bethlehem. Christian art has loved to depict them as children together. Yet the thought is most overwhelming when we come to meditate upon it. Art can never express Our Lord's Divinity, and so all devotional pictures fall short of the visions of our prayers.

With what haste—as if Mary's haste to him were passed into his spirit and had become the law and habit of his life—would not St. John press into the presence of Jesus, his soul bounding with the exultation of his sinless sanctity, his heart overflowing with the exuberance of speechless gratitude, feasting his eyes on the beauty of that Face, while the Mother's accent in the Child's voice thrilled through his whole being like the keen, tremulous piercings of an ecstasy! Yet how, while he ran forward with all this in his soul, would it not be arrested all at once, and changed to something unspeakably higher, as he passed within the circle of Our Lord's Divinity! How his thanksgiving, which thought to be so eloquent, would be offered in a song-like silence to the Incarnate God, while sacred fear would turn his spellbound gladness to mutest adoration, and his gratitude become speechless before the majesty of the Eternal, thus transparently veiled in human flesh!

He would tremble with delighted awe while he felt the streams of grace, ever flowing, ever new, flooding his glorious soul from the nearness of the Divine Child. Exultation, gratitude, generosity with God, a magnificent incapacity of consorting with earthly things—these were obviously the characteristics of his devotion to the Babe of Bethlehem. Happy they who catch his spirit! Happy they on whom God bestows an especial attraction to this resplendent saint!

Attraction to St. John the Baptist is one of the ways to Jesus, and a way of His own appointment, and upon which, therefore, a peculiar blessing rests. He was chosen to prepare men's hearts to be the thrones of their Lord. It was even he who laid the foundations of the college of the Apostles in Peter and Andrew and John, who were his disciples. Attractiveness was hung around the Baptist like a spell. In what did it consist? Doubtless in gifts of nature as well as grace, for such is God's way. Yet it is difficult to see in what it resided. As the world counts things, he was an uncouth man. The savage air of the wilderness affected his rugged sweetness. His austerity, we might have imagined, had not the lives of the saints in all ages taught us differently, would have driven men away from him, either as an example or a teacher. His teaching was ungrateful to corrupt nature. It was reforming, unsparing, and dealt mainly in condemnations. Its manner was vehement, abrupt, and singularly without respect of persons. Yet all men gathered near him, even while he taught that his teaching was not final, that his mission was but a preparation, and that he was not the deliverer whom they sought. All classes, trades, ranks, and professors fluttered around him like moths round the candle, sure to be scorched by his severity, yet, whether they would or not, attracted to his light.

What could his attraction be but the sweet spirit of Bethlehem, the spirit of exultation, of generosity, of unearthliness, of the freshness of abounding grace? The whole being of that austere man, most awe-inspiring as he was of all anchorites that ever were, was overflowed with gladness. He had drunk the wine of the Precious Blood, when it was at its new-est, and he was blessedly intoxicated to the last. It was said of him before he was born that at his birth men should rejoice,

and yet there seemed no obvious reason that it should be so. When he heard the sound of Mary's voice, he leaped with exultation in his mother's womb. It was the gladness of grace. It was the triumph of redeeming love. It was the first and freshest victory of the little Conqueror of Bethlehem. When his ears were first opened with the new gift of reason, the sounds that smote them were from Mary singing her "Magnificat." How could a life ever know sadness that had so joyous, so musical a beginning?

In very childhood he went away into the wilderness, lest the world should break the charm that was around his soul. He who did no miracles was himself a miracle. His life was a portent. As Elias is hidden now on some bare, cloud-capped mountain or in the shades of unknown groves, wearing out in placid ecstasies his patient, expectant age, so John, who was both successor and forerunner of Elias, was hidden in the wilderness, with the beautiful spirit of Bethlehem within his soul, alluring angels to the desert spot, soothing the fierce natures of the beasts, making him insensible to the wayward tyranny of the elements, and nurturing his soul in spiritual grandeur. Innocent as he was, he would do penance as if he were a sinner, partly because he would not be outdone in generosity by God, and partly because the spirit of Bethlehem led him, like the Holy Child, to love hardship and to espouse poverty. Such was the child of the Precious Blood, whose unborn soul had been steeped in the beauty of the "Magnificat." Such was the first conquest of the Babe of Bethlehem, the fair creation of grace which the Infant Creator in one instance made through the sound of His Mother's voice. Happy they who, by a special devotion to him, make themselves the companions of him who was the companion of the Infant Jesus!

IV

THE ANGELS

OUR fourth type of devotion to the Sacred Infancy is to be found in the Angels. How beautiful to our eyes is that vast angelic world, with its various kingdoms of holy wonders and of spiritual magnificence! It is well worth while for a theologian to spend his whole life lying on the confines of that bright creation, to mark the lights and gleams which come to him from out of those realms of the eldest-born sons of God. It is not only sweet to learn of those whose companions in bliss we hope some day to be, and one of whose royal princes is ever at our side even now, ennobling rather than demeaning himself by ministries of secret love, but it is sweeter still to know so much more of God as even our imperfect theology of the Angels can teach us. No one knows the loveliness of moonlight till he has beheld it on the sea. So does the ocean of angelic life on its clear field of boundless waters reflect, and as it were magnify by its reflection, the shining of God's glory. Devotion to the Angels is a devotion which emancipates the soul from littleness, and gives it blissful habits of un-earthly thought. Purer than the driven snow are all those countless spirits, pure in the exuberance of their own beautiful natures, not by the toilsome chastening of austerity, nor by the quick or gradual death of nature at the hands of grace. Mary, their queen, looks down into them forevermore, and the white light of her exceeding purity is reflected in them, as in deep, still waters. They come nearest to God, and it is one of the rubrics of heaven's service that the incense of men's prayers should be burned before God by Angels.

Yet they are our kin. We look up to them more as elder brothers than as creatures set far apart from us by the pre-eminence of their natures. We love them with a yearning love; we make sure of being the comrades of their eternal joys; we even imitate their impossible heights without despair; for their beauty invigorates rather than disheartens us. It is an endless delight to us that they serve God so well, while we are serving

Him so poorly, and that they themselves so abound in love that they joy in the love of men. Yet truly why should they not prize what even God so ineffably desires? Beautiful land! beautiful, bright people! how wonderfully the splendor of creation shines in them, while from off their ceaseless wings they are ever scattering lights and odors, which are all of God and from God's home, and make us homesick, as exiles are who smell some native, almost-forgotten flower, or hear the strains of some long-silent patriotic melody. No cold gulf is between us and those angelic spirits. Like a ship that hangs upon a summer sea with its fair white sails, and one while seems to belong to the blue deep, and another while to be rather a creature of the sunny air, so do the dear Angels hang, and brood, and float over this sea of human joys and sorrows, never too high above us to be beyond our reach, and more often mingling, like Raphael, their unsullied light with our darkness, as if they were but the best, the kindest, and the noblest of ourselves.

Immense was their devotion to the Babe of Bethlehem. He was the cause of their perseverance and its means. There is not a grace in the deep treasuries of their rapturous being, which is not from the Babe of Bethlehem, and from Him, not simply as the Word, but as the Incarnate Word. It was the vision of His Sacred Humanity which was at once their trial, their sanctification, and their perseverance. The Babe of Bethlehem was shown to them amid the central fires of the Godhead, and they adored, and loved, and humbled themselves before that lower nature which it was His good pleasure to assume. They greeted with acclamations of exulting loyalty the announcement that His mortal Mother was to be their queen. They longed for the day when Anna's child should gladden the distant earth; and heaven has scarce heard sweeter music than they made on the day she was assumed and crowned. Thus, devotion to the Holy Child was more than a devotion to them; it was their salvation; it was their religion. They almost longed it was their redemption also. If the weakness and infirmity of His Incarnation was a glorious probation to them, and to their fallen brethren a fatal stumbling-block, the littleness and seeming dishonor of His Childhood formed as it were the extreme case of the Incarnation; for they had

not even the dignity of victim and of sacrifice which clad as with a mantle the shame and violence of Calvary.

We cannot doubt, therefore, of their special attraction to the Sacred Infancy. Christmas has always seemed to all men as one of the Angels' feasts. With what holy envy, then, must they not have regarded the fortunate Gabriel, waiting on Daniel, the man of desires, and inspiring him with sweet, precipitate prophecies, and still more when he went forth on his embassies that were preparatory to the great mystery, bearing messages to Joachim and Anna, to Zacharias and Elizabeth; but most of all they envied him when he went to Nazareth at midnight and saluted Mary with a salutation which was not his alone, but the salutation of the whole angelic world, and then stood back a little in blissful, trembling reverence, while the Eternal Spirit overshadowed their young queen, and the sweet mystery was accomplished. They envied Michael, the official guardian of the Sacred Humanity, whose zeal devoured his unconsuming spirit, even as the zeal of Jesus devoured the Sacred Heart. They envied Raphael, the man-like Angel, the healer and the redeemer, because he was so like to Jesus in his character, and made such beautiful revelations of the pathos there was in God.

But they did not envy Michael or Raphael as they envied the fortunate Gabriel. Oh, how for nine months they hung about the happy Mother, the living tabernacle of the Incomprehensible Creator! Yet none but Gabriel might speak, none but Gabriel float over Joseph in his sleep and whisper to him heavenly words in the thick of his anxious dreams. But when the Little Flower came up from underground, and bloomed visibly in Bethlehem at midnight, and filled the world with sudden fragrance, winter though it was, and dark, and in a sunless Cave, then heaven was allowed to open, and their voices and their instruments were given to the Angels, and the floodgates of their impatient jubilee were drawn up, and they were bidden to sing such strains of divinest triumph as the listening earth had never heard before, not even when those same morning-stars had sung at its creation, such strains as were meet only for a triumph where the Everlasting God was celebrating the victories of His boundless love. Down into the deep seas

flowed the celestial harmony. Over the mountain-tops the billows of the glorious music rolled. The vast vaults of the purple night rung with it in clear liquid resonance. The clouds trembled in its undulations. Sleep waved its wings, and dreams of hope fell upon the sons of men. The inferior creatures were hushed and soothed. The very woods stood still in the night breeze, and the starlit rivers flowed more silently to hear. The flowers distilled double perfumes, as if they were bleeding to death with their unstanch'd sweetness. Earth herself felt lightened of her load of guilt; and distant worlds, wheeling far off in space, were inundated with the angelic melody. Silent, in impatient adoration, they had leaned over towards earth at the moment of the Incarnation. Silent, and scarce held in by the omnipotent hand of God, they pressed like walls of burning fire around the Cross on Calvary. But at Bethlehem the waters of their inward jubilee burst forth unreprieved, and overran all God's creation with the wondrous spells of that "Gloria in excelsis," which is itself not only a beautiful revelation of angelic nature, but also the worship round the Throne made for one moment audible on this low lying earth. Who does not see that Bethlehem was the predilection of the Angels?

It is not possible for us to apprehend all the spiritual beauty which lay deep down, glorifying God, in this devotion of the Angels. It was plainly a devotion of joy, of such joy as Angels can feel. It was joy in a mystery long pondered, long expected, yet whose glory took them by surprise when at length it came. It was at once a joy that so much was now fulfilled, and also that God had, as usual, so outstripped all hopes in the fulfilment. It was a joy full of unselfishness towards men, whose nature was at that moment so gently, yet so irresistibly, triumphing over theirs. In their song they made no mention of themselves, only of God in the highest, and then of men on earth. How beautiful, how holy is this silence about themselves! They gave way to their younger brothers with the infinite gracefulness which nothing but genuine superiority can show. It was a joy full of intelligent adoration of the Word, an intelligence which none on earth could equal but the Mother of the Word. It was thus a reparation for the ignorance of

man, for the rudeness of Bethlehem, and for all that was yet to come of the inhospitality of earth to its Incarnate Maker. It was more like Mary's worship than like Joseph's, because it was so full of self-oblivion. If an Angel could ever be otherwise than self-possessed, we might have called it too spontaneous to be recollected, too jubilant to be self-abased. It was more like an outburst of grandeur which they could not help than an offering of deliberate and meditative worship. It was the overflow of heaven seeking fresh room for itself on earth. It was also a devotion like the Baptist's; for it was freighted with long ages of angelic gratitude, teeming with mysterious memories of their ancient probation, the welcome beatitude of the reality of that primal worship, in whose visionary beauty their predestination had been accomplished.

V

THE SHEPHERDS

FROM the Angels who sang we pass to the Shepherds who heard their heavenly songs, a simple audience, yet such as does not ill assort with a divine election. They are our fifth type of devotion to the Sacred Infancy. We know nothing of their antecedents. We know nothing of what followed their privileged worship of the Babe. They come out of the cloud for a moment. We see them in the starlight of the clear winter night. A divine halo is around them. They are chosen from among men. Angels speak to them. We hear of the Shepherds themselves speaking to others of the wondrous Babe that they had seen, a King, a concealed King, born in a stable-cave, yet for all that a heavenly King. Then the clouds close over again. The Shepherds disappear. We know no more of them. Their end is as hidden as their beginning was. Yet when a light from God falls upon a man, it betokens something in his antecedents which heaven has given him, or which has attracted heaven. Those lights do not fall by accident, like the chance sunbeams let through the rents in the pavilion of the clouds, shedding a partial glory with their transient gleams on rock and wood and fern and the many-colored moss-cushioned water-courses, but leaving others in the cold shade that are as beautiful as those which they carelessly illumine. Their early history is as obscure to us as that of Joseph. Nor are they unlike Joseph. They have his hiddenness and his simplicity, without the self-awed majesty of his stupendous office. They were self-possessed, not by the hold which an interior spirit gave them over themselves, but through their extreme simplicity. An angel spoke to them, and they were neither humbled by it nor elated; they are only afraid of the great light around them. It was as much a matter of course to them, so far as belief in the intelligence, as if some belated peasant neighbor had passed by them on their pastoral watch and told them some strange news. To simple minds, as to deep ones, everything is its own evidence. They heard the angelic

chorus, and were soothed by it, and yet reflected not upon the honor done themselves who were admitted to be its audience. Theirs was the simplicity of a childlike holiness, which does not care to discriminate between the natural and the supernatural. Their restful souls were all life long becalmed in the thought of God.

The faith and promptitude of simplicity are not less heroic than those of wisdom. The Shepherds fell not below the Kings in the exercise of these great virtues. But there was less self-consciousness in the promptitude of the Shepherds than in the marvellous docility and swift sacrifice of the Kings. They represent also the place which simplicity occupies in the kingdom of Christ; for, next to that of Mary and Joseph, theirs was the first external worship earth offered to the new-born Babe of Bethlehem.

Simplicity comes very near to God, because boldness is one of its most congenial graces. It comes near, because it is not dreaming how near it comes. It does not think of itself at all, even to realize its own unworthiness; and therefore it hastens when a more self-conscious reverence would be slow; and it is at home where another kind of sanctity would be waiting for permissions. It is startled sometimes, like a timid fawn, and once startled it is not easily reassured. Such souls are not so much humbled as they are simple. The same end is attained in them by a different grace, producing a kindred yet almost a more beautiful holiness. In like manner as simplicity is to them in the place of humility, joy often satisfies in them the claims of adoration. They come to God in an artless way, with a sort of unsuspecting effrontery of love, and when they have come to Him, they simply rejoice, and nothing more. It is their way of adoring Him. It fits in with the rest of their graces; and their simplicity makes all harmonious. There is something almost rustic at times in the way in which such souls take great graces and divine confidences as matters of course, and the Holy Spirit sports with their simplicity and singleness of soul. They are for ever children, and, by an instinct, haunt the sanctuaries of the Sacred Infancy. Their perfection is, in truth, a mystical childhood, reflecting, almost perpetuating, the Childhood of our dearest Lord.

How beautifully too is Our Lord's attraction to the lowly represented in the call of these rough, childlike, pastoral men! Outside the Cave, He calls the Shepherds first of all. They are men who have lived in the habits of the meek creatures they tend, until their inward life has caught habits of a kindred sort. They lie out at night on the cold mountain-side, or in the chill blue mist of the valley. They hear the winds moan over the earth, and the rude rains beat them during the sleepless night. The face of the moon has become familiar to them, and the silent stars mingle more with their thoughts than they themselves suspect. They are poor and hardy, nursed in solitude and on scant living, dwellers out of doors and not in the bright cheer of domestic homes.

Such are the men the Babe calls first; and they come as their sheep would come to their own call. They come to worship Him, and the worship of their simplicity is joy, and the voice of joy is praise. God loves the praises of the lowly. There is something grateful to Him in the faith, something confiding in the love, which emboldens the lowly to offer Him the tribute of their praise. He loves also the praises of the gently, meekly happy. Happiness is the temper of holiness; and, if the voice of patient anguish is praise to God, much more is the clear voice of happiness, a happiness that fastens not on created things, but is centered in Himself. They have hardly laid hold of God who are not supremely happy even in the midst of an inferior and sensible unhappiness. They, whose sunshine is from Him Who is within them, worship God brightly out of a blessedness which the world cannot touch, because it gushes upwards from a sanctuary that lies too deep for rifling. Sadness is a sort of spiritual disability. A melancholy man can never be more than a convalescent in the house of God. He may think much of God, but he worships very little. God has rather to wait upon him as his infirmarian, than he to wait on God as his Father and his King. There, is no moral imbecility so great as that of querulousness and sentimentality. Joy is the freshness of our spirits. Joy is the lifelong morning of our souls, an habitual sunrise out of which worship and heroic virtue come. Sprightly and grave, swift and self-forgetting, meditative and daring, with its faiths all

sights and its hopes all certainties, full of that blessed self-deceit of love that it must give to God more than it receives, and yet for ever finding out with delighted surprise that it is in truth always and only receiving—such is the devotion of the happy man. To the happy man all duties are easy because all duties are new; and they are always done with the freshness and alacrity of novelty. They are like our old familiar woods, which, as each day they glisten in the dawn, look each day like a new unvisited, and foreign scene.

But he who lies down at full length on life, as if it were a sick-bed—poor, languishing soul! what will he ever do for God? The very simplicity of the Shepherds would not let them keep their praise a secret to themselves. If there are saints who keep secrets for God's glory, there are saints also whose way of worshipping His glory is to tell the wonders which He has let them see. But such saints must have a rare simplicity for their presiding grace, and this simplicity is a better shield than secrecy. Thus secrecy, which is almost a universal need of souls, is no necessity for them. Hence the Shepherds were the first apostles, the apostles of the Sacred Infancy. The first apostles were shepherds, the second fishermen. Sweet allegory! it is thus that God reveals Himself by His choices, and there are volumes of revelation in each choice.

The figures of the Shepherds have grown to look so natural to us in our thought-pictures of Bethlehem, that it almost seems now as if they were inseparable from it, and indispensable to the mystery. What a beautiful congruity there is between the part they play and their pastoral occupation! The very contrasts are congruities. Heaven opens and reveals itself to earth, making itself but one side of the choir to sing the office of the Nativity, while earth is to be the other; and earth's answer to the open heavens is the pastoral gentleness of those simple-minded watchmen. She sets her Shepherds to match the heavenly singers, and counts their simplicity her most harmonious response to angelical intelligence. Truly earth was wise in this her deed, and teaches her sons philosophy. It was congruous too, that simplicity should be the first worship which the outer world sent into the Cave of Bethlehem.

For what is the grace of simplicity but a permanent childhood of the soul, fixed there by a special operation of the Holy Ghost, and therefore a fitting worship for the Holy Child Himself? Their Infant-like heavenly-mindedness suited His infantine condition, as well as it suited the purity of the heavenly hosts that were singing in the upper air. Beautiful figures, on whom God's light rested for a moment, and then all was dark again! they were not mere shapes of light, golden imaginings, ideal forms, that filled in the Divine Artist's mysterious picture. They were living souls, tender yet not faultless men, with inequalities in the monotony of their human lot that often lowered them, in temper and in repining, to the level of those around them. They were not so unlike ourselves, though they float in the golden haze of a glorious picture. They fell back out of the strong light unrepiningly, to their sheep-flocks and their night-watches. Their after years were hidden in the pathetic obscurity which is common to all blameless poverty; and they are hidden now in the sea of light which lies, like a golden veil of mist, close round the throne of the Incarnate Word.

VI

THE MAGI

BUT now a change comes over the scene, which seems at first sight but little in keeping with the characteristic lowliness of Bethlehem. A cavalcade from the far East comes up this way. The camel bells are tinkling. A retinue of attendants accompanies three Kings of different Oriental tribes, who come with their various offerings to the new-born Babe. It is a history more romantic than romance itself would dare to be. Those swarthy men are among the wisest of the studious East. They represent the lore and science of their day. Yet have they done what the world would surely esteem the most foolish of actions. They were men whose science led them to God, men, we may be sure, of meditative habits, of ascetic lives, and of habitual prayer. The fragments of early tradition and the obscure records of ancient prophecies, belonging to their nations, have been to them as precious deposits which spoke of God and were filled with hidden truth. The corruption of the world, which they as Kings might see from their elevation far and wide, pressed heavily upon their loving hearts. They too pined for a Redeemer, for some heavenly Visitant, for a new beginning of the world, for the coming of a Son of God, for one who should save them from their sins. Their tribes, doubtless, lived in close alliance; and they themselves were bound together by the ties of a friendship, which the same pure yearnings after greater goodness and higher things cemented. Never yet had kings more royal souls. In the dark blue of the lustrous sky there rose a new or hitherto unnoticed star. Its apparition could not escape the notice of these Oriental sages, who nightly watched the skies; for their science was also their theology. It was the star of which an ancient prophecy had spoken. Perhaps it drooped low towards earth and wheeled a too swift course, to be like one of the other stars. Perhaps it trailed a line of light after it, slowly, yet with visible movement, and so little above the horizon, or with such obvious downward slanting course, that it seemed as if it beckoned to them, as if an angel were bearing a lamp

to light the feet of pilgrims, and timed his going to their slowness, and had not shot too far ahead during the bright day, but was found and welcomed each night as a faithful indicator pointing to the Cave of Bethlehem.

How often God prefers to teach by night rather than by day! Meanwhile, doubtless, the instincts of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of these wise rulers drew them towards the star. They followed it as men follow a vocation, hardly seeing clearly at first that they are following a divine lead. Wild and romantic as the conduct of these wise enthusiasts seemed, they did not hesitate. After due counsel they pronounced the luminous finger to be the star of the old prophecy, and therefore God was come. They left their homes, their state, and their affairs, and journeyed westward, they knew not whither, led nightly by the star that slipped onward in its silent groove. They were the representatives of the heathen world moving forward to the feet of the universal Saviour. They came to the gates of Jerusalem; and there God did honor to His Church. He withdrew the guidance of the star, because now the better guidance of the synagogue was at their command. The oracles of the law pronounced that Bethlehem was to be the birthplace of Messias; and the wise men passed onwards to the humble village. Again the star shone out in the blue heavens, and slowly sank earthward over the Cave of Bethlehem, and presently the devout Kings were at the feet of Jesus.

It would take a whole volume to comment to the full on this sweet legend of the Gospel. The Babe, it seems, will move the heights of the world as well as the lowlands. He will now call wisdom to His crib, as He has but lately called simplicity. Yet how different is His call! For wise men and for Kings some signs were wanted, and, because they were wise Kings, scientific signs. As the sweet patience and obscure hardships of a lowly life prepared the souls of the Shepherds, so to the Kings their years of Oriental lore were as the preparation of the Gospel. Yet true science has also its childlike spirit, its beautiful simplicity. Learning makes children of its professors, when their hearts are humble and their lives pure. It was a simple thing of them to leave their homes, their latticed palaces or their royal tents. They were simple too, when

they were in their trouble at Jerusalem because of the disappearance of the star. But when the end of all broke upon them, when the star left them at that half stable and half cave, and they beheld a Child of abject poverty, lying in a manger upon straw between an ox and an ass, with, as the world would speak, an old artisan of the lower class to represent His father, and a girlish, ill-assorted Mother, then was the triumph of their simplicity. They hesitated not for one moment. There was no inward questioning as to whether there was a divine likelihood about all this. Their inward eye was cleansed to see divine things with an unerring clearness, and to appreciate them with an instantaneous accuracy. They had come all that way for this. They had brought their gleaming metals and rich frankincense to the caverned cattle-shed, where the myrrh alone seemed in keeping with the circumstances of the Child. They were content. It was not merely all they wanted; it was more than they wanted, more than they had ever dreamed. Who could come to Jesus and to Mary, and not go away contented, if their hearts were pure—go away contented, yet not content to go away? How kingly seemed to them the poverty of that Babe of Bethlehem, how right royal that sinless Mother's lap on which He was enthroned!

The grand characteristic of their devotion was its faith. Next to Peter's and to Abraham's there never in the world was faith like theirs. Faith is what strikes us in them at every turn, and faith that was from the first heroic. Had they not all their lives long been out-looking for the Promised One? And what was that but faith? They rested in faith on the old traditions, which their Bedouin or Hindoo tribes had kept. They had utter faith in the ancient prophecies. They had faith in the star when they beheld it, and such faith that no worldly considerations could stand before its face. The star led them on by inland track or by ribbed seashore; but their faith never wavered. It disappeared at Jerusalem, and straightway everything about them was at fault except their faith. The star had gone. Faith sought the synagogue, and acted on the words of the teachers. Faith lighted up the Cave when they entered it, and let them not be scandalized with the scandal of the Cross. They had faith in the warning that came to them by dream, and they obeyed. Faith is the quickest of all learners; for it

soon loses itself in that love which sees and understands all things at a glance. How many men think to cure their spiritual ills by increasing their love, when they had better be cultivating their faith! So in this one visit to Bethlehem the Kings learned the whole Gospel, and left the Babe, perfect theologians and complete apostles. They taught in their own lands the faith which was all in all to them. They held on through persecution, won souls to Christ, spread memories of Mary, and shed their blood joyously for a faith they felt too cheaply purchased, too parsimoniously requited, by the sternest martyrdom.

We must mark also how detachment went along with faith, detachment from home, from royalty, from popularity, from life itself. So it always is. Faith and detachment are inseparable graces. They are twins of the soul, and grow together, and are so like they can hardly be distinguished, and they live together in such one-hearted sympathy that it seems as if they had but one life between them, and must needs die together. Detachment is the right grace for the noble, the right grace for the rich, the right grace for the learned. Let us feed our faith, and so shall we become detached. He, who is ever looking with straining eyes at the far mountains of the happy land beyond the sea, cheats himself of many a mile of weary distance; and while the slant columns of white wavering rain are sounding over the treeless moorland, and beating like scourges upon him, he is away in the green sunshine that he sees beyond the gulf, and the storm growls past him as if it felt he was no victim. This is the picture of detachment, forgetting all things in the sweet company of its elder twin-brother faith. Thus may we say of these three royal sages, that their devotion was one of faith up to seeming folly, as the wise man's devotion always is, of generosity up to romance, and of perseverance up to martyrdom.

These three Kings, like the Shepherds, are beautiful figures in the Cave of Bethlehem, because the attractions of Jesus are so sweetly exemplified in them. He has drawn them from the far Orient by the leading-string of a floating star. He has drawn them into the darkness of His ignoble poverty, into the shame of His neglected obscurity, and they have gone from Him with their souls replenished with His loveliness. There

is something exotic in the beauty of the whole mystery. It reads in St. Matthew like a foreign legend, and why should it be in St. Matthew's Gospel, when it should naturally have been in St. Luke's? It seems to float over the Sacred Infancy more like an unchained cloud, that anchors itself in the breathless sunny calm for a while, and then sails off or melts into the blue. As the congruity of the Shepherds was beautiful, so the apparent incongruity of the Magians is in its own way beautiful as well.

What right had ingots of ruddy gold to be gleaming in the Cave of Bethlehem? Arabian perfumes were meeter for Herod's halls than for the cattle-shed scoped in the gloomy rock. The myrrh truly was in its place, however costly it might be, for it prophesied in pathetic silence of that bitter-sweet quintessence of love, which should be extracted for men from the Sacred Humanity of the Babe, in the press of Calvary. Yet myrrh was a strange omen for a Babe Who was the splendor of heaven and the joy of earth. How unmeet were all these things, and yet in their deep significance how meet! The strange secrecy too, with which this kingly Oriental progress, with picturesque costumes, and jewelled turbans, and the dark-faced slaves, and the stately-stepping camels, passed over many regions, makes it seem still more like a visionary splendor, a many-colored apparition, and not a sober mystery of the humble Incarnate Word. It is a bright vision of old beathen faith, of the first heathen faith that worshipped Mary's Son, and it is beautiful enough to give us faith in its own divinity. Yet it almost makes Bethlehem too beautiful. It dazzles us with its outward show, and makes the Cave look dark, when its Oriental witchery has passed away. They who dwell much in the world of the Sacred Infancy know how, oftentimes, meditation on the Kings is too stirring and exciting for the austere tranquillity of contemplation, too manifold in the objects it brings before us, too various in the images it leaves behind. Truly it is beautiful beyond words! A household mystery to those eagles of prayer, to whom beauty brings tranquillity because they live in the upper voiceless sunshine! With most of us it is not so. They who feed on beauty must feed quietly, or it will not nurture the beautiful within them.

VII

SIMEON AND ANNA

BUT our seventh type of devotion to the Sacred Infancy brings us to a very different picture. The world of the Church is itself a hidden world; but even within it there is another world still more deeply hidden. It is the very cloister of the Holy Ghost, though without any show of cloister, a world of humblest peace, of shyest love, and of most secret communion with God. It gives us much to think of, but little to say. There is little to describe in its variety, but much in its heavenly union to feed the repose of prayer. The gorgeous apparition of the Kings in the gloomy Cave has passed away. The Babe too has left the Cave. Our present picture is the same humble mystery of Bethlehem which is now enacted on a gorgeous scene. We must pass to the glorious courts of the magnificent temple, when its little unknown Master has come to take possession, the true High Priest, with a thicker veil of incredible humiliation round Him than that which shrouded the local Holy of Holies from the gazing multitude. It is the mystery of Mary's jubilee, the Presentation of Our Lord mingling with that true-hearted deceit of humility, her needless Purification. The Babe's new worshippers are Simeon and Anna, who so resemble each other amidst their differences that we may regard them as forming one type of worship. Anna was a widow of the tribe of Aser, who filled no place in the public eye, but in whom her little circle of friends had recognized and revered the spirit of prophecy from time to time. She thus had an obscure sphere of influence of her own. She was a figure familiar to the eyes of many in Jerusalem, whose piety led them to the morning sacrifices in the temple. Bowed down with the weight of fourscore years and four, her own house was not her home, even if she had a house she could call her own. The temple was her home. It was rarely that she left its hallowed precincts. She performed in her single self the offices of a whole religious community; for she carried on the unbroken round of her adoration through the night as well as through the day. Long past the age when

bodily macerations form an indispensable element in holiness, her life was nevertheless a continual fast. Prayer was the work of her life, and penance its recreation. Herod, most likely, had never heard of her, but she was dear to God, and was known honorably to His servants: God has widows like her in all Christian cities.

Simeon also was worn out with age and watching. He had placed himself on the battlements of Sion, and, while his eyes were filled with the sweet tears of prayer, he was ever looking out for Messiah that was to come. Good people knew him well, and they said of him that he was a just man. Even and fair, striving for nothing, claiming no privileges, ready to give way, most careful to be prompt and full and considerate and timely in all his dealings with others, giving no ground for complaint to anyone, modest and self-possessed, attentive yet unobtrusive, such was the character he bore among those of his religious fellow-citizens to whom he was known. But to the edification of his justice he added the beautiful and captivating example of the tenderest piety. Devotion was the very life of his soul. The gift of piety reigned in his heart. Like many holy persons, he had set his affections on what seemed like an earthly beatific vision. He must see the Lord's Christ before he dies.

There is a look of something obstinate and fanciful in his devotion: it is in reality a height of holiness. He has cast his spiritual life in one mould; it was a life of desire, a life of watching, a life of long-delayed but never despondent waiting for the consolation of Israel. There is a humble pertinacity about his prayer, which is to bend God's will to his own. It was a mighty fire of love which burned in his simple heart, and the Holy Ghost loved to dwell among its guileless flames. It was revealed to him that his obstinate waiting had been a dear worship to God, that he should have his will, and that he should see with his aged eyes the beauty of the Lord's Christ, before he was called away from earth. He therefore was a haunter of the temple; for where should he be more likely to meet the Christ than there? How God always gives more than He promises! Simeon did not only see the Christ, but was allowed to take Him up in his arms, and doubtless to pray

a kiss of trembling reverence upon the Creator's human lips
How else could his lips have ever sung so beautiful a song,
a song so sunset-like that one might believe all the beauty of
all earth's beautiful evenings since creation had gone into it,
to fill it full of peaceful spells? He was old for a poet; but
his age has not dried or drained his heart.

The infirm old man held bravely in his arms the strength
of the Omnipotent. He held up the Light of the world on high
in the midst of His own temple, just before he himself was
lost in the inaccessible light of a glorious eternity. His weak
eyes, misty with age and dim with tears, looked into the deep
eyes of the Babe of Bethlehem, and to his faith they were
fountains of eternal light. This was the vision that he had
been seeing all his life long. He had wept over the drooping
fortunes of Israel, but much more over the shepherdless wan-
derings of the souls of his dear countrymen. But he had ever
seen through his tears, as we may see through a thick storm
of rain, waving like a ponderous curtain to and fro, while the
wind is slowly undrawing it, a green mountain, bright and sun-
stricken, with patches of illuminated yellow corn upon its sides,
and strips of green, ferny moorland, and jutting knolls of pur-
ple heather, and the wet silvery shimmering on the roofs of
men's dwellings.

Now the evenings of life was come. The rain was passed
away, and the Lord's mountain came out, not bright and radi-
ant only, but so astonishingly near that he might have thought
his eyes were but deceiving him. But no! the face of Jesus
was close to his. Heaven had come to him on earth. It was
the heaven of his own choosing. Strange lover of his land and
people! he had preferred to see Jesus on earth, and so be sure
that now poor Israel might possess Him, rather than have
gone long since by an earlier death to have seen the Word
through the quiet dimness of Abraham's bosom. Was it not
the loveliest of mysteries to see those arms, that were shaking
and unsteady with long lapse of time, so fondly enfolding the
ever-young eternity of God? Was it not enough for Simeon?
Oh, was it not unspeakably more than enough? As nightin-
gales are said to have sung themselves to death, so Simeon
died, not of the sweet weariness of his long watching, but of

the fullness of his contentment, of the satisfaction of his desires, of the very new youth of soul which the touch of the Eternal Child had infused into his age; and breaking forth into music which heaven itself might envy and could not surpass, he died with his world-soothing song upon his lips.

There is a little world of such souls as Simeon and Anna within the Church. But it lies deep down, and its inmates are seldom brought to the light, even by the honors of canonization. It is a subterranean world, the diamond-mine of the Church, from whose caverns a stone of wondrous lustre is taken now and then to feed our faith, to reveal to us the abundant though hidden operations of grace, and to comfort us, when the world's wickedness and our own depress us, by showing that God has pastures of His own under our very feet, where His glory feeds without our seeing it. So that, as sight goes for little in the world of faith, in nothing does it go for less than in the seeming evil of the world. Everywhere evil is undermined by good. It is only that good is undermost; and this is one of the supernatural conditions of God's presence. As much evil as we see, so much good or more do we know assuredly lies under it, which, if not equal to the evil in extent, is far greater in weight, and power, and worth, and substance. Evil makes more show, and thus has a look of victory, while good is daily outwitting evil by simulating defeat. We must never think of the Church, without allowing largely for the extent of obscure piety, the sphere of hidden souls. We can form no intellectual judgment of the abundance of grace, of the number of the saved, or of the inward beauty of individual souls, which even intellectually is worth anything, unless we form our estimate in the light of prayer. Charity is the truest truth; and the judgments of charity are large. The light of our own unsanctified judgment is at best but as moonlight in the world of faith, strangely distorting, grotesquely disfiguring everything. The light of prayer is as the beam of steadfast day. Who does not know how sunshine positively peoples mountain-side and wood; how, as it rests, it builds homes we could dwell in, so our fancy deems, in the rifted crags or under the leafy shades; how, wherever it has touched, it has located a beauty, and has left it when it passes

n? So is it with the light of prayer, when it plays upon this difficult questionable world around us. It alone lights up for us continually this incessant heaven upon earth, this precious region of obscure souls, in which God is always served as if it were one of the angelic choirs. Who does not remember when a supernatural principle first unveiled itself before him, and showed that it was a thing of God? It was some one moment in a dawn of prayer, which was like day's first inroad upon night. So will it be with us to the end. Faith has a sort of vision of its own; but there is no light in which it can distinguish objects, except the light of prayer.

We must always, therefore, keep our eye fixed on this obscure world of holy hidden souls, that private unsuspected stronghold of God's glory upon earth, where so much of His treasure is laid up. Simeon and Anna are disclosures to us of that hidden world. They have a place, an office, and a power in the life of the Church, which is not the less indispensable because it is also indefinable. The Father's glory would not have been adequately represented at the court of the Infant Jesus, if this obscure region had not sent thither its embassy of lowly beauty and of venerable grace.

Much of our most intimate acquaintance with the adorable character of God arises from our observations of this hidden world. It is the richest of all worlds in its contributions to the science of divine things. If we may venture so to speak, God is less upon His guard against our observations there than elsewhere. He affects secrecy the less Himself, because the particular world in which He is working is itself so secret. He is content with the twilight round Him, without pitching His well-known tent of darkness each time He vouchsafes to camp. In the case of the Shepherds we saw how they came up out of darkness, stood for a moment in the splendor of Bethlehem, and then passed on into the dark again. Here we see, with Simeon and Anna, what a long preparation God makes in the soul for what appears to be only a momentary manifestation. It shows of what deep import a brief transient mystery is, when a novitiate of perhaps fourscore years is barely long enough to fit those for their part in it, who are after all but accessories and incidents. If it be true to say that with God

all ends are only means, because He is Himself the only veritable end, so also is it true in a sense that all means with Him are ends, because He is present in those means. Thus, these long lives of preparation for one momentary appearance on the stage of the world's drama are, when we view them supernaturally, ends themselves, and each step of grace in the long career, each link of holiness in the vast chain, is itself a most sufficient end, because it holds in itself Him who is the only end. But this is not the way men judge of history. With them it is a wandering humanity which is made to confer the importance on the actors in the world's theatre, and to confer it in proportion to the visible results between the actors and humanity. With God it is His own glory which is the hidden centre of all history, and it requires a special study, with a strong habit of faith and a steady light of prayer, to enable us to read history in His way.

But, besides this long preparation for a momentary and subordinate appearance in a divine mystery, we must observe also how God often comes to men in their old age. They have lived for that which only comes when real life seems past. What a divine meaning there is in all this! The significance of a whole life often comes uppermost only in the preparation for death. Our destiny only begins to be fulfilled, after it appears to have been worked out. Who knows what he is intended for? What we have dreamed was our mission is of all things the least likely to have been such. For missions are divine things, and therefore, generally hidden, generally unconsciously fulfilled. If there are some who seem to have done their work early, and then live on we know not why, there are far more who do their real work later on, and not a few who only do it in the act of dying. Nay, is it not almost so in natural things? Life for the most part blooms only once, and like the aloe it blooms late.

Neither must we fail to note under what circumstances it is God's habit to come to these hidden souls. The devotion of Simeon and Anna is eminently a devotion of prayer and church-frequenting. In other words, God comes to holy souls, not so much in heroic actions, which are rather the soul's leaping upward to God, but in the performance of ordinary, habitual

devotions, and the discharge of modest, unobtrusive duties, made heroic by long perseverance and inward intensity. How much matter for thought is there in all these reflections; and in divine things what is matter for thought is matter for practice also! Thus, if the angelic song was the opening of heaven before our eyes, this apparition of Simeon and Anna is the opening beneath our feet of an exquisite hidden world, a realm of subterranean angels, a secret abyss of human hearts in which God loves to hide Himself, a region of evening calmness and of twilight tranquillity, a world of rest and yet of power, heated with the whole day's sunshine and giving forth its fragrance to the cooling dews, a world, which not only teaches us much, but consoles us also, yet leaves us pensive (for does not consolation always leave us so?) casting over us a profitable spiritual shadow, like the melancholy in which a beautiful sunset so often steeps the mind, breeding more loving thoughts of others, and in ourselves a more contented lowliness.

The lake lies smooth and motionless in the quiet light of evening. The great mountains with their bosses of mottled crag protruding through the green turf, and the islets with their aerial pines, are all imaged downwards in the pellucid waters. Even the heron that has just gone to roost on the dead branch is mirrored there. The faintly rosy sky between the tops of the many-fingered firs is reflected there, as if it were fairy fret-work in the mere. But upon yon promontory of rock a little blameless boy, afraid of the extreme tranquillity, or angry with it, or to satisfy some impulsive restlessness within him, has thrown a stone into the lake, and that fairy world, that delicate creation, is instantly broken up and fled. So is it with that spiritual world of placid beauty, which we have been contemplating in the worship of Simeon and Anna.

VIII

THE HOLY INNOCENTS

OUR next type of devotion to the Sacred Infancy drives us with shout and cry from its pleasant melancholy, as if we were trespassers in such a gentle world. Yet it is not altogether a scene of unmingled violence which is coming. But who does not know those plaintive sounds, sad in themselves, but sadder in their circumstances, which can sometimes extinguish even the shining of bright light, making one sense master another, like the cry of the lapwing among ruins? So is it with us now. Like silent apparitions, Simeon and Anna pass away. We hear loud voices and shrill expostulations, as of women in misery talking all at once, like a jargon in the summer woods when the birds have risen against the hawk, and then the fearful cry of excited lamentation, with the piteous moaning of the infant victims mingled with the inconsolable wailing of their brave, powerless mothers. It is the massacre of the Holy Innocents. Yet even this dismal scene is a scene of worship. Tragic as it is, it has a quiet side, and a beauty which, blood-stained though it be, is not unbecoming to the meek majesty of Bethlehem. Alas! how the anguish of those mothers, that were so inconsiderate to her who was on the point of becoming a mother like themselves, and how the wrathful but more silent misery of the fathers, is expiating in its own streets the inhospitality of Bethlehem.

But those little ones are mighty saints of God, and their infant cries were a most articulate revelation of many of His mysterious ways. The apparent contradiction that innocence should do penance is one of the primary laws of the Incarnation. The Infant Saviour Himself began it. It was involved in the state of humiliation in which He came. It was part of the pathos of a fallen world. But none shared it with Him at Bethlehem, except the Holy Innocents. To Mary He brought a new access of heavenly joy, and when the tender hand of Simeon was nerved by the Holy Ghost to plant in her heart the first of the seven swords she was to bear, it was the un-

timely woe of Calvary that pierced her soul, and not the penances of Bethlehem. To Joseph the joy the Infant brought was yet more unmingled. The Baptist leaped with exultation in his mother's womb when the Babe came near. The Angels sang because the mystery was full of jubilee. To the Shepherds it was good tidings of great joy, and to the Kings contentment and delight. To Simeon and Anna also He came as light, and peace, and satisfaction, and jubilee. His brightness had made earth so dull, that all which was left them now was speedily to die. But the Holy Innocents joined their infant cries with His. To them the glad Christmas and the singing Angels brought but blood and death. They were the first martyrs of the Word, and their guilt was His—that they were born in Bethlehem.

Renewing the miracle which He had wrought for John the Baptist, Our Lord is said to have conferred the full use of reason, with immense and magnificent graces, on these little ones at the moment of their martyrdom, so that they might see Him in the clear splendor of their faith, might voluntarily accept of death for His sake, and might accompany their sacrifice by the loftiest acts of supernatural holiness and heroism. The revelations of the saints also tell us of the singular power now accorded in heaven to these infant martyrs, especially in connection with deathbeds, and St. Francis of Sales died, reiterating with marked emphasis and significance the invocation of the Holy Innocents. They too were beautiful figures in the court of Bethlehem. They were children like the Prince of Bethlehem Himself. They were His companions in nativity, His mates in age and size; and though it was no slight thing to have these natural alliances with Him, by grace they were much more, for they were likenesses of Him, and they were His martyrs. A twofold light shines in the faces of this infant crowd, the light of Mary, and the light of Jesus. They resembled Mary in their sinless purity; for even if Our Lord had not constituted them in a state of grace before, their original sin would be more than expiated by their guileless blood, when it was shed for Him. It was a fearful font, a most bloody sacrament, at which an Infant like themselves held them as their godfather, that they might lie in His paternal

bosom for evermore. They were like Mary in their martyrdom for Jesus, as all the martyrs were; but they were like her also, in that their martyrdom was as it were the act of Jesus Himself. He was the sword which slew them. He was the proximate cause of all they suffered. It is only more remotely so with the other martyrs. This is one of their distinctions. They resembled her also in their nearness to Jesus. They were among the few who were admitted into the hierarchy of the Incarnation. Their souls were amidst the attendants who waited on His Human Soul when He rose on Easter morning, and who ascended with Him into heaven. But the light of Jesus also was in their faces. It was not only in the material similitudes of being born when He was born, and where He was born, that they were like Him. They resembled Him with a most divine truthfulness, by being bidden to counterfeit Him. Their mission was to represent Him, to stand in His place, to be supposed to contain Him among themselves.

Simeon and Anna lived long lives before they reached their work, and it was laid gently at their doors at the very extremity of life. Their earthly work lay almost at the threshold of heaven. The lot of the Innocents was the reverse of this. They were just born, and their mission was handed to them instantly and abruptly, and its fulfilment was death. Yet in what a sense is it true of all of us, that we are but born to die! Happy they who find the great wisdom which lies in that little truth! But there was more than this in their likeness to Our Lord. In one way they outstripped Him. They died for Him as He died for all. They paid Him back the life He laid down for them. Nay, they were beforehand with Him, for they laid down their lives for Him, before He laid His down for them. They saved His life. They put off His Calvary. They secured to us His sweet parables, His glorious miracles, and those abysses of His grown-up Passion, in which the souls of the redeemed dwell in their proper element, like fish within the deep. Yet, again, is there not a sense in which we all pay our dear Lord back with our lives for the life that He gave us? What is a Christian life but a lingering death, of which physical death is but the last consummating act; and if it be not all for Christ, how is it a Christian life? Never-

theless, in the historical reality of all this lies the grand prerogative of the Holy Innocents.

Notwithstanding their miraculous use of reason, they are still types to us of that devotion so common among the higher saints, the devotion of almost unconscious mortification. They are like those who commit themselves to God, and then take what is sure to come. They not only commit themselves to Him without conditions, but they do not count the cost, because to them His love is cheaply bought at the price of all possible sacrifices. Hence there is no cost to count. The truest mortification does not forecast, because it is self-oblivious. Thus it was with James and John, when they offered to drink our Saviour's cup; and how heroically they did drink it, when it came! Thus it is that heroic mortification is so often taken by surprise, and men, who cannot discern the saints aright, think that the grandeur of their purpose for a moment faltered, when all the while the surprise was only stirring up deeper depths of grace, and meriting the more divinely. These infant martyrs represent also what must in its measure befall everyone who draws near to Jesus. Suffering goes out of Him like an atmosphere. The air is charged with the seed of crosses, and the soul is sown all over with them before it is aware.

Moreover, the cross is a quick growth, and can spring up, and blossom, and bear fruit almost in a night, while from its vivacious root a score of fresh crosses will spring up and cover the soul with the peculiar verdure of Calvary. They that come nearest to Our Lord are those who suffer most, and who suffer the most unselfishly. With His use of reason He could have spoken and complained; so might the Innocents, but they worshipped only with their cries. One moment they were made aware of the full value of their dear lives, and the next moment they were of their own accord to give them up, and not to let their newly-given reason plead, but even to hide it with the cries of unreasoning infancy. Never were martyrs placed under so peculiar a trial. How well they teach the old lesson, that unselfishness is its own reward; and that to hold our tongues about our wrongs is to create a new fountain of happiness within ourselves, which only needs the shade of secrecy

to be perennial! If they paid dear for the honor of being the fellow-townsmen of Our Lord, how magnificent were the graces, which none but He could have accumulated in that short moment, and which He gave to them with such a regal plenitude! To be near Jesus was the height of happiness, yet it was also both a necessity and a privilege of suffering. We cannot spare the Holy Innocents from the beautiful world of Bethlehem. Next to Mary and Joseph, we could take them away least of all. Without them we should read the riddle of the Incarnation wrong, by missing many of its deepest laws. They are symbols to us of the necessities of nearness to Our Lord. They are the living laws of the vicinity of Jesus. Softened through long ages, the mothers' cries and the children's moans come to us almost as a sad strain of music, sweeter than it is sad, sweet even because it is so sad, the moving elegy of Bethlehem.

IX

ST. LUKE THE EVANGELIST

THERE is still another presence in the Cave of Bethlehem, which is a type of devotion to the Sacred Infancy. Deep withdrawn into the shade, so as to be scarcely visible, stands one who is gazing on all the mysteries with holy amazement and tenderest rapture. He takes no part in any of them. His attitude is one of mute observance. He is like one of those shadowy figures which painters sometimes introduce into their pictures, rather as suggesting something to the beholder than as historically part of the action represented. It is St. Luke, the "beloved physician" of St. Paul, and the first Christian painter. He forms a type of worship by himself, and must not be detached from the other eight, though he was out of time with them. To us he is an essential feature of Bethlehem. The Holy Ghost had elected him to be the historiographer of the Sacred Infancy. Without Him we should have known nothing of the Holy Childhood, except the startling visit of the three heathen Kings, which was so deeply impressed on St. Matthew's Hebrew imagination, together with the massacre of the Innocents and the flight into Egypt, which were the consequences of that visit, and so part of the one history. In the vision of inspiration the Holy Ghost renewed to him the world of Bethlehem, and the sweet spiritual pageantry of all its gentle mysteries. To him, the first artist of the Church, we fitly owe the three songs of the Gospel, the "Magnificat," the "Benedictus," and the "Nunc Dimittis." He was as much the Evangelist of the Sacred Infancy, as St. John was the Evangelist of the Word's Divinity, or St. Matthew and St. Mark of the active life of our Blessed Lord.

He represents the devotion of artists, and the posture of Christian art at the feet of the Incarnate Saviour. Christian art, rightly considered, is at once a theology and a worship—a theology which has its own method of teaching, its own ways of representation, its own devout discoveries, its own varying opinions, all of which are beautiful so long as they are in subordination to the mind of the Church. What is the Blessed

John of Fiesole's *Life of Christ* but, next to St. Thomas, the most magnificent treatise on the Incarnation which was ever conceived or composed? No one can study it without learning new truths each time. It gives up slowly and by degrees to the loving eye the rich treasures of a master-mind, full of depth, and tenderness, and truth, and heavenly ideal. It is a means of grace which sanctifies us as we look upon it, and melts us into prayer.

Of a truth art is a revelation from heaven, and a mighty power for God. It is a merciful disclosure to men of His more hidden beauty. It brings out things in God which lie too deep for words, things which words must needs make heresies, if they try to speak them. In virtue of its heavenly origin it has a special grace to purify men's souls, and to unite them to God by first making them unearthly. If art debased is the earthliest of things, true art, not unmindful that it also, like Our Lord, was born in Bethlehem, and cradled with Him there, is an influence in the soul, so heavenly that it almost seems akin to grace. It is a worship too as well as a theology. From what abyss rose those marvellous forms upon the eye of John of Fiesole, except from the depths of prayer? Have we not often seen the divine Mother and her Blessed Child so depicted that it was plain they never were the fruit of prayer, and do we not instinctively condemn them even on the score of art, without directly adverting to religious feeling? The temper of art is a temper of adoration. Only a humble man can paint divine things grandly. His types are delicate and easily missed, shifting under the least pressure and bending unless handled softly. An artist, who is not joined to God, may work wonders of genius with his pencil and colors; but the heavenly spirit, the essence of Christian art, will have evaporated from his work. It may remain to future generations as a trophy of anatomy, and a triumph of peculiar coloring; but it will not remain as a source of holiest inspiration to Christian minds, and an ever-flowing fountain of the glory of God. It may be admired in the gallery; it would offend over the altar. Theology and devotion both owe a heavy debt to art, but it is as parents owe debts to their loving children. They take as gifts what came from themselves, and they love

to consider that what is due to them by justice is rather paid to them out of the spontaneous generosity of love. St. Luke is the type and symbol of this true art, which is the child of devotion and theology; and it is significant that he is thus connected with the world of Bethlehem.

The characteristics which have been noticed in his Gospel seemed to be most congenial to his vocation. Our Lord's life is everywhere the representation of the beautiful; but in none of its mysteries is it a more copious fountain of art than in those of His Sacred Infancy; and it is these which inspiration has especially loved to disclose to St. Luke's predilection. A painter is a poet also; and hence his Gospel is the treasury in which the Christian canticles, all of them canticles of the Sacred Infancy, are laid up and embalmed for the delight and consolation of all time. The preservation of them was a natural instinct of an artistic mind, which was already fitted to receive a bidding of inspiration so congenial to itself. He was a physician as well as a painter, and there is something kindred in the spirit of the two occupations. The quick eye, the observant gentleness, the appreciation of character, the seizing of the actual circumstances, the genial spirit, the minute attentiveness, the sympathizing heart, the impressionableness to all that is soft, and winning, and lovely, and weak, and piteous—all these things belong to the true physician as well as to the true artist. Hence has it come to pass that the physician of the body has so often been the physician of the soul as well. That which is truly artistic in him makes him a kind of priest; and what above all things are priests, artists, and physicians, but angelic ministers to human sorrow, ministers of love and not of fear, vested with a pathetic office of consolation, which, strange to say, seems the more tender and unselfish because it is official. Thus, St. Luke is noted for his instinct for souls. His Gospel has been named the Gospel of mercy, because it is so full of incidents of Our Lord's love of sinners. It is from him chiefly that we have the conversions of sinners, and the examples of Our Lord's amazing kindness to them, or we may say rather of His positive attraction to them, like the physician's attraction to the sick, to use the figure which He Himself vouchsafed to use, in order to justify Himself for this

compassionate propensity. After Mary, Luke is the beginner of the devotion to the Precious Blood, whose apparently indiscriminate abundance and instantaneous absolving power he so artfully magnifies in his beautiful Gospel. It is a Gospel of sunshine. It throws strong light into the darkest places, and loves to use the power it has to do so: and is not all this painter-like? The examples, to which the fallen sinner turns instinctively when hope and despair are battling for his soul, are mostly in the Gospel of St. Luke. He chose what he most loved himself; and inspiration ministered to the bent of his genius, rather than diverted or ignored it. He is known, like all artists, by his choice of subjects. What wonder he was the dear companion of St. Paul, when their minds were so congenial! The magnifying of grace, the facility and abundance of redemption, the vast treasures of hope, the delight of reconciliation with God, the predilection for the grand phenomena of conversion, all these peculiarities of St. Luke's genius would recommend him to the apostle of the Precious Blood, and would also give him swift admission to the intimacy of Mary.

It was perhaps through her that the Holy Ghost revealed to him the mysteries of Bethlehem. To John she spake of the Eternal Generation of the Word, to Luke of Nazareth and Bethlehem, of the Angels and the Shepherds, and the Gospel Songs. For devotion to Mary is an inalienable inspiration of Christian art, and it is akin also to devotion to the Babe of Bethlehem. Luke, with the painter's license, gazed into Mary's face, as none other but the Infant Jesus had ever gazed into it. He read the mysteries of Bethlehem depicted there. He drank the spirit of the Sacred Infancy in the fountains of her eyes. He lived with the Mother of Mercy, until he saw nothing but mercy in her Son. The image in his heart, which was the model of all other images, was the countenance of the divine Mother. His idea of Jesus was His marvelous likeness to Mary, likeness, not in features only, but in office and in soul. Thus was the spirit of beauty within him instinctively drawn to Bethlehem, just as Bethlehem has been the most queenly attraction of holy art ever since. Then, when he comes to Our Lord's public life and His intercourse with men, it is just such

manifestations of His Sacred Heart as are the most congenial to the spirit of the Sacred Infancy, which his predilection chooses for his written portrait of the Incarnate Word. Let us place him then in the Cave of Bethlehem, withdrawn into the shadow, and looking out from thence with the boldness of his tender eyes upon the mysteries around him. He is there by the appointment of the Holy Ghost, as the painter of Mary and the secretary of the Infant Jesus.

CONCLUSION

SUCH were the first worshippers of Bethlehem, nine types of devotion shown to us there, full of spiritual loveliness and attraction: nine separate seas that image heaven in their own way, or form altogether one harmonious ocean of worship of the Incarnate Word. We may join ourselves, first to one, and then to another, of these nine choirs of first worshippers, and adore the Incarnate Word. How wonderful is the variety of devotion, more endless than the variations of light and shade, or the ever-shifting processions of the graceful clouds, or the never-twice-repeated tracery of the forest architecture, as endless apparently as the excellences of Him Who is the centre of all devotion! We may venture, not uninvited, into that dear sanctuary of Bethlehem, and be as heart to Mary or as thought to Joseph, as voice to John or as harps to the Angels, as sheep to the Shepherds or as incense to the Kings, as sweet sights to Simeon and to Anna, or as soft sighs to the Holy Innocents, or as a pen for Luke to write with, and to write of the Babe of Bethlehem. Is it not a beautiful sea of tranquil devotion, with the spirit of Bethlehem settling down over the purple of its waters, like one of those silent sunsets which are so beautiful that it seems as if they ought to make music in the air?

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